

Halvorson Applauds Courage of Ottawa Woman

Column By, U.S. Congresswoman, Debbie Halvorson (IL-11)

During the month of May, we celebrate mothers and the gift of life they've given us. Through the years, we've also used this time to not only acknowledge mom, but to remember our grandmothers, wives, sisters, aunts, and friends as well. It's a celebration of sisterhood of sorts - and while we acknowledge our strengths as women, we must also reflect on our unique challenges.

Breast cancer is one of our greater challenges. We should use this time in May to advocate for and promote good breast health. Awareness programs provide visibility - like the wear-pink program. We've done a good job when it comes to awareness, but still, every three minutes a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer in the U.S. Every 13 minutes, a woman dies.

One way or another, we have experienced breast cancer. For those living with breast cancer, frustration and stress often comes with the navigation of our health care system. I understand those frustrations very well, and in fact, my own mom fought the system for years in trying to obtain insurance coverage as a breast cancer survivor.

My mom's experience is echoed among others who access the system. Just recently, I had the privilege to work with an incredible woman who lives with breast cancer, Janet Billings of Ottawa. Janet was diagnosed with stage III breast cancer in 2003. She is insured - and since her diagnosis she has undergone two chemo treatments, nine surgeries - and some relief. And then the cancer returned in October 2008.

That is when she decided to visit our regional director, Samantha Warren at the 11th District office in LaSalle. With a "not curable" cancer diagnosis, Janet has an opportunity for treatment that can extend her life. As a young woman with insurance coverage, Janet is determined to live life to its fullest. However, she recently found out that even with insurance coverage, the system is difficult to maneuver - and stressful as well. Our office is now working through her issue, and it is Janet's hope to see others benefit from the experience.

Courageous as she is, Janet understands that it takes time for things to change. In fact there is a distinct possibility that she may not personally see the issue come full circle. Yet, she still fights for others... for the 2.4 million women in the U. S. who've been diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer... for those who are frustrated with parts of the health care system.

Much of that frustration is part of a bigger problem. It is evident that there is a lack of affordability and accessibility in our health care system. It is out of reach for many American families - and is often caused by preexisting conditions or cost. The good news is we're working to get better - thanks to early detection and awareness programs, mortality rates have dropped since 1990. Because of our attention to breast cancer, there are about 2.5 million breast cancer survivors living in the U. S. today.

We've taken another significant step for early detection recently when Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (FL-20), myself and several other members who are leaders on healthcare issues introduced new legislation for the prevention of breast cancer, the Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act (EARLY Act). Rep. Wasserman Schultz approached me about this bill after a successful battle with breast cancer last year when she found a lump during a routine self-examination. Bill action would include a major awareness campaign that helps young women and providers identify specific threats and warning signs of breast cancer. Prevention and early diagnosis are part of the focus to reduce risks.

The EARLY Act promotes education and visibility for the disease and its issues. It will offer a national education campaign to increase awareness of the threats posed by breast cancer in young women of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

There are other good things happening as well. For example, a cancer benefit will be held for Janet Billings on May 9 in Oglesby. Information on the event is at www.janetbillingsbenefit.com. She's a very courageous woman - her story, coupled with new legislation and an increase in awareness has given me renewed hope. As long as we work together to make a difference, we can continue the fight. I am committed to it - and to the good health of our moms, sisters, wives, aunts and friends.